INDIAN ASSOCIATION FOR WOMEN'S STUDIES

XV National Conference on Women's Studies

Sub-theme:11

Theme: Gender, Religion and Democracy

Despite the goal of a secular ethos in India, it can be safely argued that the politicization of religion has been making strong inroads in contemporary times. The politics of religion and violence associated with it has strategically deployed gender in multifarious ways. Sometimes in the name of 'honour', sometimes in the name of 'rights' politicized religion has a long record of not only targeting women in times of communal pogroms or riots, but also of suppressing women's attempts at assertion of rights and freedoms.

The growth of communal politics, the deep seated divisions it creates, and the present majoritarian offensive have indeed attempted to further deprive women of independent voice and have complicated the terrain on which women's rights are articulated. Among the majority community, those who fought bitterly against women being conferred a degree of equality in the Hindu Marriage Act, who in social practice have allowed galloping dowry, daughter aversion, and continuing discrimination against girls/women within families, who repeatedly deploy coercion against women who go in for inter-faith marriages, who promote the male breadwinner/female housewife social model and sanction abandonment of wives who fail in their 'duties' on this count - when they speak of personal rights of women in minority communities, particularly Muslims, it reflects a communal agenda and not the interests of Muslim women. At the same time, there remains a continuing tussle between personal laws, politicized religions, modernization, and equality for women. Further, a growing assertion by women pushing their concerns as women in majority and minority religions, and against marginalization within their communities, is a particular feature of contemporary times. Evolving complexities and their rapidly changing elements and features suggests the need to move away from static conceptions of uniformity or stasis towards dynamic reconceptualization and reconsideration of the significant intersection of gender, religion and democracy in the contemporary Asian societies especially in India.

In recent times democracy is being understood not only as translatable into institutions and structures of the state but also inhering the domains of education, art, popular culture, literature etc. and religion away from textual analysis or institutional structures into understanding everyday practices. As such the relationship between democracy, gender and religion also needs to be remapped through a study of such domains and processes. Gender and religion in popular cinema, television are some of the domains that need to be studied, especially in a context of television serials having contributed to consolidation of Hindu religiosity and majoritarian Hindu 'nationalism' as well as the explicit politicization of the religion. Similarly, we also need to understand how the female and male gurus/babaas/inspirational speakers are reconfiguring the notion of devotion and the female/male devotee in the contemporary period. Also interesting are the ways in which these religious figures reconfigure femininity, masculinity, through their public devotional practices.

In this sub-theme, we invite papers to reflect on gender and religion in public and private spheres, on politicized religions and women's vulnerability; contemporary perspectives about a Common Civil Code; on how the relationship between the State (in terms of policies and laws) and Religions (in terms of institutional structures such as endowments) is changing and how gender is implicated in this process; on the challenge by hitherto structurally excluded sections such as Dalits or women and their forays into forbidden temples and customs, and how such moves re-articulate the relationship between religion, gender and democracy in contemporary India; on women's experiences in relation to religious personal laws and religious education and with community based formal and informal institutions. Other areas that may be explored are religious identity, gender and majoritarian nationalism; state regulation and management of religion, religious devotion and religious practices; minority religions and community/social reform initiatives; religious practices, sexuality and gender identities; feminist politics and women's religiosity; understanding women's activism for equality within religion; personal laws and community identities.

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